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SUBJECT: HONDURAS SIGNS ON TO "BOLIVARIAN ALTERNATIVE"
DESPITE WIDE OPPOSITION

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¶1. (U) Summary: President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya signed on to Hugo Chavez' Bolivarian Alternative for America (ALBA) on August 25 at a lavish event attended by VIPs from other ALBA countries and a paid crowd of approximately 40,000 people. The day of speeches failed to shed much new light on what Zelaya was signing; the text has not been made public. Despite the fanfare, almost all sectors of Honduran society continue to oppose ALBA. Meanwhile, the Minister for Women's Affairs resigned her position and women's rights groups demonstrated in opposition to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's presence. End summary.

¶2. (U) The presidents of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia, along with the Vice President of Cuba, cabinet ministers from Ecuador and Dominica, as well as the ambassadors from Uruguay, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic joined Zelaya and a beaming Paty Rodas on the dais. Approximately 40 thousand people were in the crowd, according to preliminary estimates, but the crowd appeared largely indifferent to events on the dais, and the number had dwindled significantly by the end of the event. (Note: One group of approximately 500 people from the indigenous-environmental organization COPINH made their way to the rally by way of the US Embassy, chanting demands for the release of the "Cuban Five," jailed in the United States. End Note)

¶3. (U) The Zelaya administration spared no expense to showcase the ALBA signing ceremony. Newspapers estimated the overall cost of the event to be from USD 1 million to 3 million, an enormous sum in this struggling economy. Liberal Party President Patricia "Paty" Rodas had openly stated they would pay people the equivalent of USD 25 and up (Note: for the average Honduran, this amounts to more than a week's wage), plus a free lunch to attend the rally at the Presidential Palace. Embosfs observed convoys of buses streaming into the capital from the countryside.

¶4. (U) The event featured a series of speeches from the VIP guests, including 45 minutes of socialist rhetoric and anti-U.S. invective from Venezuelan president Chavez, in which he repeated his claim that President Bush was intoxicated at the Olympic Games, and dubbed President Zelaya

"Commander Cowboy" (Comandante Vaquero). On ALBA, Chavez stated "it does not oblige, it liberates," and spoke of the development of "grand national" enterprises of a unified Latin America, in contrast to the trans-national corporations of the capitalist model of "The Empire." President Zelaya followed with another 45 minute speech, in which he said one of the benefits of ALBA would be the capitalization of BANADESA, the Honduran agricultural development bank. No one provided any details about the terms of the agreement Zelaya signed.

15. (U) Private sector groups, the media, and politicians across the political spectrum have expressed their opposition to ALBA. A coalition of Honduran expatriates put out television and newspaper ads characterizing ALBA as an anti-U.S. military alliance that would jeopardize relations with the United States and much-needed remittances. The Honduran press, whose attitude beforehand had been skeptical at best, turned openly hostile in response to Chavez' comments upon arrival. At the airport, Chavez insulted the Honduran press when a reporter tried to get past Chavez' own press entourage. In his comments later, Chavez stated that the Honduran media were in the hands of the "piti-yankis," a derogatory term he used in his speech at the ceremony to describe all the sectors of Honduran society which oppose ALBA. The Honduran press pounced on this, demanding he and his press corps show more respect and noting he was no longer in Venezuela, but rather in a country with a free press.

16. (U) While counter-demonstrations were generally small, the press paid a significant amount of attention before the ceremony to the protests by women's rights groups against the presence of Nicaraguan President Ortega. Many Sunday newspapers ran long background stories of the sexual abuse claims made by Ortega's step-daughter, and Selma Estrada,

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Minister of the Institution for Women's Issues, resigned to protest his visit.

17. (SBU) Comment: All indications are that ALBA is widely unpopular in Honduras. Monday's events were a wake-up call for the Honduran press; we have yet to see if the more cautious political leadership will react as strongly. While current indications are that the Honduran congress will not ratify ALBA, the political environment is too fluid to make a firm prediction. The signing event did little to build popular support, and instead alienated more Hondurans, many of whom expressed shock at the language of the speeches and that such an event could take place in their country at all.

End comment.

HENSHAW